

Tower of babble

Censorship on the Internet is provoking a torrid debate in Cyberspace. Now Christian groups have joined in, imposing their moral viewpoint to the proceedings.

Peter Warren uncovers the secular backlash

A dispute which has been raging in Brighton over the past month, between a mixed bag of Christians, plumbers and Net free-thinkers, could have huge implications for the Internet. It comes at a time of increasing concern about just what is allowed to be said on the Net.

In the US, legislation is being proposed to counter the volume of pornographic material, while parents can now avail themselves of a regularly updated program called 'Surf-watch', which prevents access to known sex sites on the Net. A US judge has ruled that Net provider Prodigy is a publisher and, therefore, liable for the contents of its bulletin board, while in Connecticut it has just been made illegal to harass women on the Web.

These developments have thrown those fighting for freedom of information into a panic.

More interesting, and worrying from the point of view of those maintaining the Net's informative integrity, is the presence of pro-censorship Christians, a development already seen in the US, but relatively new over here.

But it's a topic that provoked a more violent reaction than the issue of censorship itself.

Using a discussion area of service provider Pavilion, Net-surfer Ian Crawford posted the message: 'NET POLICE

*** Do you know this pervert?' and effectively went on to 'out' an individual he suspected of paedophilia, by revealing his Internet address.

His provocative statement immediately drew a huge response from all quarters, including a handful of Christian surfers, opening a debate on censorship.

But the discourse which ensued obscured

the most fundamental issue: is it right, or even legal, to name an individual on limited evidence in a public forum? Instead, the debate on censorship was deemed less important by some than the fact that a group of ageing Christians with an agenda was on the Net.

What concerned 'Simon the Plumber', real name Simon Turner, was that people like Crawford, and those whom Turner saw as Christian moralists, were out of line — God was on the Net and should be made to go away.

His view was shared by 'Matt Planet', 22, real name Matthew Trott. 'Let's be honest, real paedophiles wouldn't use the Net, they'd use bulletin boards. I think anyone who's on the Net can be traced. These people were just trolling [being provocative to excite a debate] to get up people's noses.'

'There's a big age difference, as far as we can work out they're over 40. The Net has become a much more diverse place recently and we're starting to see what I suppose you'd call

'your average person', says Trott, who prophesies darkly that such social changes in the make-up of the punters mean that a battle has started for the soul of the Net.

According to Gordon Banks (not his real name), a 53-year-old computer software engineer, he is simply

reclaiming his old territory. 'For this lot, when you get to 21 access to the Net is prohibited,' says Banks, a practising Catholic who rigorously defended his right to preach on the Net. 'It's a public place and I can say what I believe,' he adds, dismissing the talk of censorship as puerile.

Banks blames the increased 'chatter' on the



Pro-censorship Christianity has crossed the Atlantic, and is finding support with UK Internet users

hype surrounding the Net: 'Because of the increased bandwidth the Net is now an anarchic, multipath messaging system — the idea of censorship is ludicrous unless you close down all the service providers.' He maintains instead that it is a public place and there is a need for social responsibility.

This call for self-censorship received support from Father Anthony Milner, a 30-year-old Roman Catholic priest at St Mary of the Angels, Worthing, and a former BT communications engineer. The presence of yet another believer was confirmation in Planet's eyes that this sudden convergence of Christians was no accident.

Father Milner has only been on the Net since Easter, using it for global communications and theological research. He denies the Christian conspiracy theory, stating that his interest is simply one of morals.

'Christians do tend to agree on a number of issues, especially on questions of basic morality, and so you tend to find that because Christians are pulling together, people think there must be a conspiracy going on,' he says, adding that he entered the debate for purely personal reasons.

'I can't see why the Net should be subject to different laws from any other form of publishing on whatever type of material. It is a form of publication, and it's a far freer form of publication; anyone can easily put stuff on it.'

'I think that the laws which already govern offences relating to publication should be sharpened to cover that sort of crime when it is perpetrated on the Net,' says Milner, who, like Banks, defends his self-censorship crusade on the grounds of social responsibility.

'If the Net were self-policing then that would be better, the danger with law is that it's a blunt instrument.'

'Censorship is something that should be avoided if at all possible. Only when it is the lesser of two evils should you resort to it,' says Milner, whose current Net signature is: 'Minds are like umbrellas — they only work when they're open.'

'If people on the Net want to stay free of external controls, they have to find some way of exercising internal controls. I don't think it can be an absolute free-for-all. People shouldn't be encouraging others to be dangerously anti-social.'

Ironically, it was Jay Daley, a 27-year-old atheist, wrongly identified as an evangelical, who managed to provoke Brighton's anti-censorship lobby to its biggest display of fire.

Daley, a computer manager at East Sussex Council, believes that unless the Net addresses its own problems now, the powers that be may choose to inflict far greater controls.

'I think it is far better that we impose censorship on ourselves rather than waiting for it to come from outside. We need censorship and it is far better if it comes from the left and the centre rather than the right.'

'I don't think there should be police on the Net, it's up to individuals to monitor what's happening.'

'It's fairly easy to know where to draw the line on things like pornography, after all, we do it in every other area of our lives,' says Daley, who accuses many of those ranged against him of being part-time hippies. Daley claims they are missing the point, and that one of the peculiarities of the Net is its efficiency at distributing information.

Both Daley and Milner are unwilling to let the matter drop, a fact which they say the so-called part-time hippies will probably learn to their cost.

'If the Net is a highway, then there are a huge number of people travelling along it and passing signs advertising information. If you put a sign outside a house on a normal street then perhaps a few 100 people will see it. On the Net you could easily reach millions. This means that the views of tiny minorities can be much more influential than they have been to date,' says Daley.

True to its blueprint, the Net version of Speaker's Corner is a haven for anyone with a view in their head, but unless legislation is introduced, the controversy over censorship will continue to rage. ■

'The Internet is a public place and I can say what I believe'

— Gordon Banks, software engineer, defending his right to preach on the Net